

Turning Points on the Periphery? The Politics of South Africa's Platinum Belt Strike Wave in Rustenburg, Northwest, and Northam, Limpopo: 2012-2014

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Abstract

Mineworkers have been positioned at the forefront of a new left alliance in South Africa. This article questions that assumption. It assesses the politics of workers on a mine called Swartklip, part of Anglo Platinum's operation in Limpopo Province, whose rank and file engaged in unprotected strike action in the Northam region (in 2012) before becoming part of the longest strike action in South African mining history (in 2014). Drawing from original in-depth interviews with worker leaders, the article argues that the Marikana massacre, and the concessions that workers had won from their employers at Northam, and in the Western Limb of the platinum mining belt more generally, was indeed rooted within a militant worker-driven and democratic culture which laid the groundwork for a shift in the country's broader political landscape (notably the rise of the EFF as a political force as well as the shift of NUMSA outside the ANC-alliance). However the events at Northam suggest that mineworkers in general do not envision themselves as playing a leading role in consolidating a left alternative in South Africa's 'new' political formations.

Key Words: Marikana; Amplats; trade union mobilisation; structuration; mineworkers.

Introduction

Since the police killings at Marikana platinum mine in 2012, foundational political shifts have occurred in South Africa, opening up spaces on the left of the Tri-Partite Alliance made up of the African National Congress (ANC) the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). This has included the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the so-called 'NUMSA moment' (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa), whereby the largest trade union in the country broke from the Alliance and began the process of forming a United Front to challenge the adoption of neoliberal, capitalist or anti-working-class policies by the ruling ANC. According to one analyst, the Marikana massacre was a turning point in the history of the country.¹ But what this means for the political trajectories of the actual mineworkers who led the strikes of 2012 has been relatively under-explored.

While much scholarly attention has been given to the Rustenburg region and Marikana² in Northwest Province, Limpopo Province has received far less emphasis. In particular Northam, a small and relatively isolated platinum mining town in Limpopo Province, deserves greater consideration both because it is comparatively under-researched,

¹ See P. Alexander. 'Marikana: Turning Point in South African History', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40, 138, pp. 605-619. For an analysis of workers' organisation in the platinum mines from apartheid through the transition to democracy and into the present period, see, R. Chaskalson. 'The Road to Marikana: Transformations in South Africa's Platinum Industry, 1994-2012', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 5 (2016), pp. 857-873.

² See, for example, the special issue edited by G. Capps, R. Bush, and D. Moodie, 'White Gold: New Class and Community Struggles on the South African Platinum Belt', *Review of African Political Economy*, 42, 146 (2015), pp. 497-682.

but also because of the sharpness of political consciousness of mineworkers in the region. Northam's mines, which are part of Anglo Platinum (Amplats), formed an integral part of the contemporary mineworkers' movement. Between 2012 and 2013, its workers were joining the independent Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and, in 2014, workers from the three major platinum companies united in a five months-long strike, the longest in South African mining history.³ This paper considers what impact their involvement in this lengthy flagship strike had upon the miners' political allegiances. The article also provides insight into how the mineworkers relate to the broader shifts in South Africa's political landscape which their agency helped bring about.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was abandoned, as I suggest below, not because of a wider political consciousness, but rather because the union excluded rank and file workers from wage negotiations. The main concern of the workers from 2012 to 2014 was the question of the 'living wage'. NUM was pegged as a bad negotiator and out of this failure emerged a democratic worker-driven militant culture first in the form of worker committees and then (in 2014) under the auspices of AMCU. The support for the EFF, and to a lesser extent NUMSA, in the region is not based on ideological commitment, the article suggests, but is primarily instrumentalist and, importantly, confined within a relatively narrow militant (yet democratic) trade union culture. The mineworkers did have broader discussions about the ANC, but this was limited primarily to the perceived role that the party played in the killing of mineworkers on 16 August 2012. The evidence presented in the article indicates that workers joined worker committees and later AMCU because they were perceived as more democratic and worker driven and could bargain more effectively over their wage demands.

Exploring the in-depth case study of one company, in Northam, the article demonstrates that mineworkers' agency changed over time as a result of exclusion from wage negotiations rooted in the limitations of the then dominant union – the NUM. By tracing the origins and historical development of the strike wave (which began in the Rustenburg platinum, and then spread to Northam) the article also suggests that the changing nature of popular agency was not the result of an attempt to move towards an alternative or left political project, nor was it embedded within a kind of socialist consciousness. Lenin's approach resonates: 'The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; but the most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology none the less spontaneously imposes itself upon the worker to a still greater degree.'⁴ On the one hand workers engaged in militant and democratic strike action which potentially offered a radical politics which would extend into a broader political movement for the working class. On the other their ideology reflected the narrow confines of 'economism' or what Lenin terms a conservative trade union consciousness bound within the existing capitalist system.

This article draws from original in-depth interviews, mostly in 2016, with mineworker leaders at Swartklip as well as news reports and other documents, in order to investigate stages of development in the thinking of mineworkers based at Swartklip. It is rooted within a

³ Anglo Platinum, Impala and Lonmin are the three largest platinum mining companies in the world, located in the bushveld complex which stretches from Rustenburg in North West South Africa to Limpopo and into Zimbabwe. The area contains more than 80 per cent of the world's platinum. For an extensive discussion of the political economy of the 'boom' of the South African mining platinum industry from the mid-1990s until the late 2000s, see G. Capps. 'Victims of its own success? The Platinum Mining Industry and the Apartheid Mineral Property System in South Africa's Political Transition', *Review of African Political Economy*, 39, 131 (2012), pp. 63-84.

⁴ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* [1902], in *Collected Works*, Volume V (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961). L. Sinwell and S. Mbatha, *The Spirit of Marikana: The Rise of Insurgent Trade Unionism in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2016).

much larger project that has been undertaken by myself and several researchers since 2012 on the origins and historical development of the contemporary mineworkers' movement. I used interviews and observations which were drawn from my sustained contact with Amplats worker leaders in both Rustenburg and Northam over a period of five years, to gain a unique understanding of worker politics in the region.

This much larger project involved me training a research assistant to undertake research in my absence. For both of us, fieldwork required substantial patience, and on many days we waited hours simply to speak to or spend time with mineworkers. Our intention was not only to collect archives, conduct interviews and then simply report our findings to an academic audience. We took a more ethnographic approach by spending as much time as possible with mineworkers in their own social settings: cooking together, eating, driving, having informal conversations, listening to speeches at mass meetings and, in the most trying of times, visiting leading mineworkers while they were in jail (on trumped up charges of public violence). During a relatively short period in 2013, we lived with one of the key activists in the area in his spare room in Siraleng (in Rustenburg), a mining community just outside of Khuseleka, Amplats. It was there that we met several worker leaders from Northam, about an hour's drive north of Rustenburg. These contacts assisted us in conducting in-depth, rigorous interviews with other informants. I therefore draw from aspects of this broader empirical research project in order to supplement the research I undertook in 2016 in Northam.

Building upon the historical work of Philip Bonner, this study examines the process of social transformation through the lens of workers outside of the major metropolises.⁵ Northam lies in a peripheral region, where the western limb of platinum extends from what may be called the centre, that is the Rustenburg region in the Northwest. The article extends Dunbar Moodie's important historical work on the Northam region of the platinum belt dating back to the 1990s and early 2000s,⁶ by revealing the dynamics of worker mobilisation there during the unprotected platinum belt strike wave of the early 2010s, that had already engulfed the Rustenburg region.

The following section provides an initial overview of events in the platinum belt since 2012. It then situates mineworkers' ongoing struggles within the literature on the major political shifts that have occurred since Marikana, including NUMSA's break from the ANC alliance and the emergence of the EFF. The section indicates that mineworkers were at the forefront of the collective agency that contributed to structural changes to the political landscape in South Africa. And yet the empirical evidence presented in the core of the article suggests that mineworkers do not envision themselves as playing a leading role in the 'new' political formations that they helped give rise to.

Initial overview of events

South Africa's platinum mines experienced an unprecedented wave of upheaval between 2012 and 2014. Workers at the three platinum giants – Amplats, Impala and Lonmin – each undertook extensive unprotected strikes in 2012. By the end of January 2012 at Impala, worker unrest had spread beyond the informal collective of rock drill operators (RDOs) and virtually the entire workforce had downed tools. That first strike ended on 3 March and the RDO's pay was increased to R9,000. Discontent with the NUM came to a head at Impala because the union opposed the popular unprotected strike. As was not

⁵ P. Bonner, 'History and the Here and Now', *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 39, 2 (2013), pp. 159-166.

⁶ D. Moodie, 'Making Mincemeat out of Mutton-Eaters: Social Origins of the NUM Decline on Platinum', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 5 (2016), pp. 841-856.

unusual in South African mine strikes, substantial violence was used against strike breakers and several deaths occurred. By the end of the strike, management had fired 18,000 of the striking mineworkers. This effectively ended their union membership. About 11,000 others had resigned as NUM members at Impala by 30 March 2012. The perceived shortcomings of the union at each of the three major platinum mining companies, especially its failure to defend workers subject to dismissal for engaging in unprotected strikes, provided the immediate structural conditions in which informal worker committees arose, and a mineworkers' movement took hold.⁷

Amplats took a few months longer to join the industrial action of 2012, which eventually spread across the platinum belt. Notoriously, on 16 August of that year, 34 mineworkers were gunned down at Marikana by the police while demanding what they called a 'living wage'. Of the three strikes, Amplats in Rustenburg held on the longest. The October 2012 strike action at Amandelbult and Swartklip – Amplats mines in Limpopo Province – is intimately linked to the strikes in Rustenburg, where the strike wave originated. At that time, Amandelbult and Swartklip employed in the region of 20,000 mineworkers.

The NUM, once a social movement union,⁸ was now seen by many rank and file workers to be in the pockets of management. By 2013, the vast majority of workers across the entire platinum belt had joined AMCU and in 2014 the union led an intensive five-month strike. The workers were demanding a living wage of R12,500 across the platinum mines. AMCU, with President Joseph Mathunjwa at the helm, emerged victorious in 2014. It is now the dominant union, at least in the Rustenburg platinum belt, but also in Northam.

A few notes on union membership will provide the reader with context. On a national scale, AMCU's membership increased from about 10,000 members in 2011 to about 120,000 in 2013, and in the platinum sector as a whole AMCU grew to 70 per cent of the workforce. In that year, the NUM dropped from more than 50 per cent to about 20 per cent membership in the sector (having lost the vast majority of its members to AMCU).⁹ Between 2011 and 2015, the union lost about 40 per cent of its members overall which fell from just over 300,000 to under 200,000. At a central committee meeting held in Pretoria in June 2016, the NUM's general secretary, David Sipunzi noted that, 'Our drop was mostly affected by the incident [unprotected strikes and police killings] in Rustenburg, where we experienced most membership losses'.¹⁰

Both the worker committees (of 2012) and AMCU's democratic 2014 strike were paradoxically supercharged by the Marikana massacre, which was arguably intended to quell popular resistance. The massacre, which many mineworkers believed was endorsed by the ANC, transformed the political identities of tens of thousands of mineworkers. The result was growing distance between them and the tri-partite alliance, providing the possibility that the

⁷ For a description of this strike wave and the most comprehensive study of Impala platinum mine during this period see C. Chinguno's, 'The Shifting Dynamics of the Relations between Institutionalisation and Strike Violence: A Case Study of Impala Platinum, Rustenburg (1982-2012)', PhD thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2015. See also Chinguno's, 'The Unmaking of Industrial Relations: The Case of Impala Platinum and the 2012-2013 Platinum Strike Wave', *Review of African Political Economy*, 42, 146 (2015).

⁸ D. Moodie. 'Becoming a Social Movement Union: Cyril Ramaphosa and the National Union of Mineworkers', *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 72/73 (2010), pp. 152-180.

⁹ Lonmin's Labour Relations Update, 2013 in N. Nieftagodien, 'South Africa's New Left Movements: Challenges and Hopes', in M. Paret, C. Runciman and L. Sinwell (eds), *Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective: The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy* (London and New York, Routledge, 2017), p.178.

¹⁰ H. Giokos and Z. Mahlati, 'Struggling NUM has Lost 40% of Members', 3 (June 2016), available at <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/economy/struggling-num-has-lost-40-of-members-2029959>, retrieved 8 May 2018.

union would be an important, if not integral, part of the new left political formations which were in their infancy in 2014 when mineworkers sustained five months of strike action.¹¹

Two important 'tectonic shifts' had occurred after the Marikana massacre, both of which continue to have important implications for mineworkers' political identities and for the building of an alternative left movement outside of the framework of the ruling ANC.¹² First is the EFF, an anti-capitalist, black consciousness political party that was launched in 2013 in Marikana. The Commander-in-Chief, Julius Malema, indicated that he and his colleagues chose to launch the EFF at the mountain in Marikana since mineworkers had died for their 'economic freedom'. Many mineworkers, especially those who joined AMCU, have since developed a firm relationship with the EFF. This is in part because the EFF manifesto officially adopted mineworkers' radical demand of R12,500. This amount was more than double an ordinary mineworkers' salary at the time and it was the same demand for which 34 mineworkers struck and were killed on the mountain in Marikana.

In the 2014 national elections, when the EFF gained more than one million votes (about six per cent of voters), the party became official opposition to the ANC in the Northwest Province. Here, many mineworkers moved out of the ruling party and joined them. In the 2016 local government elections, the EFF won 8.3 per cent of the total votes in the country. It won Ward 26 (which includes Marikana), having obtained near nearly 58 per cent of the vote, while the ANC still managed to wield just over 34 per cent.¹³ In her research on the EFF Marikana branch, Essop indicated that the leadership of AMCU and the EFF 'overlapped' and that there remained a 'visible convergence' between the two organisations.¹⁴ While there has been potential to create genuine links between mineworkers' ongoing mobilisation and the EFF, Nieftagodien has been more pessimistic: 'For all its radical rhetoric and penchant for public spectacles, the party remains an amalgam of populism and vanguardism, aiming to impose its predetermined programme on youth and the working class as a whole'.¹⁵

A second aspect of the 'tectonic shift' with important implications for South Africa's left politics and beyond is the breaking of NUMSA from the ANC alliance. With the decline of the NUM, NUMSA became the largest trade union in South Africa with approximately 350,000 members. At the end of 2013, the union made a decision to end its ongoing support for the ruling ANC, citing Marikana's massacre as one key reason. This set the stage for a historically momentous process which led to the union being expelled from the COSATU and forming a United Front to bring together workers and community members across the country.¹⁶

As 'an explicit, union-led attempt to overcome working-class fragmentation', Paret has posed questions about the United Front including:

¹¹ L. Sinwell and S. Mbatha, *The Spirit of Marikana: The Rise of Insurgent Trade Unionism in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2016).

¹² Nieftagodien, 'South Africa's New Left Movements', pp. 171-188.

¹³ T. Essop, 'Populism and the Political Character of the Economic Freedom Fighters – a View from the Branch', *Labour Capital and Society*, 48, 1 and 2 (2015), p. 234.

¹⁴ Essop, 'Populism and the Political Character of the Economic Freedom Fighters', p. 229.

¹⁵ Nieftagodien, 'South Africa's New Left Movements', p. 185.

¹⁶ See S. Ashman and N. Pons-Vignon. 'NUMSA, the Working Class and Socialist Politics in South Africa', *Transforming Classes: Socialist Register 2020*, 20 (October) 2015, available at <http://www.nuvole.it/wp/8-numsa-the-working-class-and-socialist-politics-in-south-africa-2/>, retrieved 8 May 2018. For a discussion on the fragmentation of the labour movement and the political implications in South Africa, see, A. Beresford, *South Africa's Political Crisis: Unfinished Liberation and Fractured Class Struggles* (New York and Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

On what basis is it possible to forge unity between unionized workers, the casually employed and the unemployed? What are the points of commonality, and what obstacles stand in the way? To what extent is each side interested in building common struggles?¹⁷

Initially, both scholars and activists were understandably hopeful about the mineworkers' involvement in this process. Given their militancy in 2012 and the fact that they operated outside of the traditional unions, it did not seem far-fetched to conclude that it could be possible to unite mineworkers and their independent union (especially AMCU) in a common struggle with the broader working class including other trade unions, precarious workers, students and communities. Pons Vignon and Ashman hinted that, 'NUMSA and AMCU may now form some kind of alliance, particularly as NUMSA has stated it will organise mineworkers'.¹⁸ There are few if any scholarly texts, however, that seek to uncover mineworkers' own political identities in relation to these two iconic shifts in the broader South African political landscape. Gentle has perhaps offered some of the most sober analysis of these political developments, concluding that the EFF and the 'NUMSA moment' 'are indices, products, outcomes, not driving forces, of this changing political landscape'.¹⁹ This article builds upon and substantiates this astute observation.

The killing of mineworkers, alongside the failures of the existing union, led workers to turn against the tri-partite alliance – in particular what workers viewed as the 'twin' ANC/NUM collaboration. As the case of Northam demonstrates, workers tended to join the EFF since it adopted a radical approach to the attainment of 'Economic Freedom in Our Lifetime'. In response to the way in which workers were excluded structurally from engaging the NUM around wage negotiations, they created their own committees and then joined AMCU which offered a militant union through which to address their demands.

Although the 'NUMSA moment' resulted in part because of the events which unfolded in the platinum belt, when the United Front was formed out of this initiative mineworkers were not predisposed to becoming involved. This is because they were centrally concerned with attaining higher wages through negotiations and extended strike action. The term 'economic unionism' provides a useful starting point from which to understand AMCU as a union and therefore its relative lack of involvement in the United Front as well as electoral politics in the form of the EFF:

Independent unions which confine their activities to the workplace (and are market focussed). Their sole interest is the improvement of the working conditions of their members, and they may be highly institutionalised, usually conservative but at times militant (such as airline pilots' unions) – but only to use their monopoly power to defend their own narrow interests, whether or not they transgress the interests of other members of the working class.²⁰

The following sections trace the origins of mineworker militancy in relation to changing historical circumstances, including those that were introduced by the killing of mineworkers in Marikana, in order to provide a deeper understanding of mineworkers' identities. I then

¹⁷ M. Paret, 'Working-Class Fragmentation, Party Politics and the Complexities of Solidarity in South Africa's United Front', *The Sociological Review*, 65, 2 (2017), p. 268.

¹⁸ S. Ashman and N. Pons-Vignon. 'NUMSA, the Working Class and Socialist Politics', no page.

¹⁹ L. Gentle, 'What About the Workers? The Demise of COSATU and the Emergence of a New Movement', *Review of African Political Economy*, 42, 146, p. 676.

²⁰ D. Pillay, 'Between Social Movement and Political Unionism: COSATU and Democratic Politics in South Africa' (unpublished paper, Witwatersrand University, 2013), p. 13.

highlight the significance of these changes in relation to present and future political trajectories both within and beyond the platinum belt.

The Marikana Massacre

While there is a significant amount of existing scholarship about the Marikana massacre and surrounding events, what remain to be explored are the ways in which the massacre helped create the pre-conditions for mass mobilisation.²¹ Indeed, events at Marikana transformed the political identities of tens of thousands of mineworkers who moved out of the dominant union, the NUM, and in many cases, the tri-partite alliance more generally. This shift in politics, as we shall see however, was largely instrumentalist. Since the NUM and ANC were viewed as sell-outs and, in the mineworkers minds, even killers (because of what happened to strikers on the mountain in Marikana), they had virtually no choice but to join an alternative political organisation, the EFF, as well as a different trade union (AMCU). These two formations were in turn strategic and successful in terms of the ways in which they tapped into mineworkers' existing demands and feelings of betrayal.

This section offers insight into the changing identities of several individual leaders at the mines in Northam, 100 kilometres north of Rustenburg, and highlights the ways in which the massacre changed their political identities. We will first discuss Phumlani Kauta who was born in the Eastern Cape at Flagstaff in the early 1980s. After he had completed engineering courses, he was told that there were jobs at the mine, by an old man who Kauta says was like a father to him. So he moved in illegally with him at Makhulu Hostel at Swartklip mine: 'They called us *Imbabala* meaning "people who do not belong here"'.²² He first became an electrical assistant until obtaining a relatively elite job as a diesel mechanic from 2009. During this time, and up until 2012, he and many of the men he spent time with in and out of work were NUM and ANC members.

His cousin was on the mountain in Marikana when 34 mineworkers were killed there. Kauta, of course, did not take this lightly. On the one hand, he took it personally. On the other, he became part of a new and dominant collective force that would oppose the tri-partite alliance, especially the ANC, but also COSATU's second largest affiliate, the NUM.

Like many other mineworkers in the Western Limb of the platinum belt, he left NUM and the ANC following this event and joined AMCU and the EFF. After Marikana, he indicated, 'most of the members [of NUM] were angry about what was happening ... we decided to join AMCU after what we saw on TV and after we saw [President of AMCU, Joseph] Mathunjwa on TV, that he was on our side'.²³ He also joined the EFF and became one of its leading regional members of the Waterburg region in Thabazimbi.

Like many others, he questioned the ANC's leadership in a democracy under which striking employees were killed in such large numbers in a small space of time. According to Kauta:

²¹ See, for example, P. Alexander, T. Lekgowa, B. Mmope, L. Sinwell and B. Xezwi, *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2012).

²² Unlike in the larger research project discussed in the methodology section of the introduction, all interviews with workers from Northam were in-depth, lasting in the region of one hour. Unless noted otherwise in the footnotes, they were conducted by either Siphiwe Mbatha or me for a project on workers' mobilisation and demobilisation in South Africa's platinum belt. The interviews were conducted in either English or isiXhosa and they were transcribed verbatim into English for the purposes of this and other academic work. These quotes are drawn from an interview with Phumlani Kauta (referred to here as Kauta) in Northam on 19 June 2016.

²³ Interview, Kauta.

I decided not to follow NUM and ANC – I quit and I joined the EFF and I am an active member of the EFF and after I joined I tried to stand up and say guys we have no other alternative . . . we talked about how do we mobilise and how do we get more members to join ‘coz we could see that the ANC is not longer with us, they are against us.’²⁴

Kauta and a handful of others created the first structures of the EFF before the national elections of 2014. He recalled:

The first guy I met came with 12 berets at Swartklip then and I bought one and [a man named] KB bought the second one and we were the first people to wear them and people asked where we got them and a guy called Mahloko that I see in Parliament now gave me 10 berets and I drove to the place where we used to gather and there they bought them and some were asking for membership forms to sign and most guys in Swartklip signed the membership forms for EFF so that’s how EFF was started and we had weekly meetings of the whole of Thabazimbi.²⁵

Bricks Luzuko Ngwini was also born in the Eastern Cape at Flagstaff. One of six children, his father worked at the mines and, in need of a job, he came to Northam to live with his father. On 21 December 2009, Bricks obtained a job as a welder. By 2016, at the time that we interviewed him, he had become a Rock Driller Operator. For Bricks, the Marikana massacre, ‘was very painful beyond what words can express because we saw how our government revolted against us [as strikers]’.²⁶

A younger mineworker in his 30s, who became one of the key leaders of the workers’ committee (and later AMCU), was known by his fellows by the unusual nickname of Fats. To this day, he likes a drink out on Friday nights at the nearby taverns where he socialises. He became an RDO at Swartklip in early 2011. Soon thereafter he decided to join the NUM and was also active in the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), but the Marikana massacre led him to leave both the ANC and the then-dominant union at the mine. In fact, like each of the other three mineworkers, he joined the EFF. According to him, Marikana conscientised the mineworkers of Northam:

... we didn’t actually understand what was happening in Rustenburg while the people were on strike [there at Impala] but after that thing of Marikana that’s when we started to see that, oh this Marikana thing is something that involved the mineworkers actually and that mineworkers are starting to wake up and see that the South African economy is only [sic] dependent on the mining industry.²⁷

Titus Setlhletsisi was to become the AMCU branch chairperson of Swartklip mine at Angloplatinum in the Northam, Limpopo region. Born on 31 July 1977 at a village called Tseoge in Marokweng in the North West Province of South Africa, Titus is the son of a farmer. His family moved to the Northern Cape in 1982 when he was in grade six since there was a drought at his birthplace. He completed his matric (high school final exams) in 1997 and by the late 1990s he had an internship as an artisan at Finsch Diamond Mine, 165

²⁴ Interview, Kauta.

²⁵ Interview, Kauta.

²⁶ These quotes and those that follow are drawn from an interview with Bricks Luzuko Ngwini in Northam on 20 July 2016.

²⁷ These quotes and those that follow are drawn from an interview with Fats (his preferred name which he is popularly known as) in Northam on 16 June 2016.

kilometres to the west of Kimberley in the Northern Cape. From the early 2000s, Titus began to work at Swartklip.

From Setlhletsì's perspective, the killing of mineworkers at Marikana was important, but there was something else that drove them to action – wages:

We are actually sympathising with Marikana... but the main thing was the living wage. We believed that what we are earning is not sufficient and we are working very hard. We [are] taking a lot of ore, they are getting money out of the ore, but we are only paid a few cents. We [are] working for hand to mouth, we don't do anything else... we just get something to eat [only]... that's how our strike started after we decided to show our dissatisfaction to the company.²⁸

The origins of the demands at Marikana, like at Northam, was around obtaining compensation for hard work and low pay, not building a left alternative that could unite various trades in a common struggle against capitalism. Still, the events at Marikana had far-reaching effects on the political identities of mineworkers in Northam: it delegitimised the ANC (which was viewed as having a hand in the massacre) and further engraved the idea that the NUM opposed their own interests. This latter point was compounded, as we shall see in the section that follows, by the exclusive nature of the NUM which helped create the basis for an autonomous worker committee that represented the workforce to take hold.

The Origins of the Strike at Swartklip, Northam

Workers at Lonmin intensified their strike action as early as the evening of the Marikana massacre on 16 August 2012 and continued for more than one month, until 18 September. Equally important, the Marikana massacre was the straw that broke the back of the NUM, which came to be viewed by many workers in the Western Limb of the platinum belt as having played a role in the massacre of mineworkers. These historical conditions did not immediately lead workers to join existing formal political organisations or trade unions. At this stage, worker committees were formed to represent the rank and file in wage negotiations only. As important as AMCU was in creating a new home for disgruntled workers, it was more of an afterthought at this stage. The exclusive nature of the NUM therefore helped provide the basis upon which an independent committee was formed in Northam, at Swartklip in particular, but these conditions were insufficient and, as we will see in the section which follows this one, it required agents from Rustenburg to rally the forces in Northam.

What appeared as a major victory at Lonmin on 18 September 2012 (a 22 per cent wage increase) prompted other employees in various workplaces across the country over the next two months to engage in unprotected strike action in the gold, diamond and coal industries. This spread eventually to automobile and truck manufacturing and the public sector. From 11 September 2012, as the Lonmin strike was coming to a close, workers at Amplats Rustenburg region began to down tools. They demanded R16,070, significantly more than the R12,500 demand at Lonmin for which workers had died on the mountain. At that stage, the nearby Amplats Northam region had not yet mobilised in an overt manner, but disillusionment with the NUM was fermenting.

Much like his counterparts in Rustenburg in the late 2000s, soon-to-be worker leader Titus Setlhletsì began to conclude that NUM shop stewards at Swartklip 'were disregarding the issues of the workers. Because if you reported something [to them] that did not sit well

²⁸ Interview, Titus.

with the workers they would take their time to respond initially.’²⁹ Titus explained that in December 2010 NUM members at the mine had agreed they would have a strike around wages. The strike began at the end of December, but when he arrived back to work from leave in January, the NUM office bearers had intervened: ‘the NUM said the strike can only last for seven days because the law only allows for that’. When Titus and other NUM members personally reviewed the Labour Relations Act (LRA), they concluded that their union leaders had betrayed them: that there was nothing in the LRA, in fact, which stipulates this seven-day limit.

He nevertheless continued to be a member of the NUM and he soon became a trusted worker leader in the mine. He represented workers at disciplinary hearings and became a full-time Health and Safety Representative at Swartklip, holding meetings with the employer every Tuesday. By later in 2012, the challenge of the AMCU rival was felt at Northam. Workers decision to join AMCU was not motivated by a wider political consciousness, but rather it was instrumentalist. Workers felt abandoned completely by NUM and they simply needed an alternative union to represent them at their workplaces. He recalled that at the time:

There was so much unhappiness in the whole mine such that at times we were taken for questioning by the mine to the extent that NUM in their mass meetings would talk about AMCU – if we asked [legitimate] questions they would say if you want to join AMCU you can join AMCU and by then already there were strikes in [and] all over Rustenburg. So there was much unhappiness by the workers of how they NUM was treating them and how they would not regard their issues when they elevated them to their offices.³⁰

Nonetheless, while the Amplats Rustenburg region began their fierce unprotected strike demanding R16,070 on 11 September 2012, Amplats Northam region only later began to prepare for action. Mineworkers in Northam were not themselves prepared to take the lead in collective action, nor were historical conditions in Northam at that point sufficient to support such action..

This changed in October 2012. By the end of September, in the Rustenburg region, the strike at Amplats had grown to 80 per cent of the workforce. *The Citizen* reported nearly 100,000 employees were on strike nationwide.³¹ This was probably more to do with worker mobilisation around Marikana than it was about the mineworkers at Amplats. Following a crackdown by 1000 South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers, workers ended their strike at Lonmin on 18 September 2012, with a 22 per cent wage increase. The CEO of Amplats issued an ultimatum stating that, if workers did not go back to work, the company would be forced to dismiss about 21,000 workers. By 5 October the threat became a reality when Amplats announced that it would dismiss 12,000 workers who did not attend the hearings to which the company called them.³²

Management’s Threats Empower Strikers

This decision by management created a new context within which strikers would enact their agency, shifting immediate historical events onto another set of tracks. It created the preconditions for the lengthy strike at Northam. Management’s threats ironically empowered

²⁹ Interview, Titus.

³⁰ Interview, Titus.

³¹ Sapa, ‘Strikers Swell to 100,000’, *The Citizen*, 28 September 2012, p. 23.

³² S. Bega, ‘Mines May Follow Amplats in Dismissing Strikers’, *Saturday Star*, 6 October 2012, p. 4

the strikers whose militant and democratic culture could not easily be swayed. This culture continued to be sustained outside of any trade union in part because of the way in which workers had been excluded from the existing union, the NUM.

According to one leader from the Amplats Rustenburg region:

He [CEO Chris Griffith] gave an announcement that 12,000 people are dismissed for going on an unprotected strike ... Those words gave us courage and we became very strong ... we are going forward because we are already fired, so there is nothing [else] that we can do. We will stay on strike until they give us our money.³³

The strike in Northam was both an indirect extension of Marikana and also a critical outcome of the stoppage at the Rustenburg section of the mine. The Amplats Rustenburg leaders, in particular a man called S.K. Makhanya and another named Thebe Maswabi, became part of the driving force behind the strike action at Northam. Makhanya, corroborated that the firings, 'made us move to Limpopo [Northam] because we saw that we are already fired... so those announcements and SMS's [sent by the company] that say that we are fired are the ones that made our strike to be solid.' He also indicated that the workers had concluded that 'we don't want to go back to work until our demands are met'. They had witnessed the fact that 'Impala went on strike and they came back with something' and asked themselves, 'How come we can go [back] to work empty-handed?'³⁴

The group of mineworker leaders resolved that the strike was at a critical turning point and that solidarity from other mines was needed. Makhanya recalled that they drove to Northam and 'went on the ground to talk to them'. He said to a group that was already meeting at Rustenburg section 'we are engaging with the company. We are having this kind of problem, but you are not on strike, you are working. We want [you] to get the reality that if the company puts the money for us, it mustn't put money for you. Because you are not on strike'.³⁵

The leaders from Rustenburg requested the workers at Northam to select leaders of their shafts to represent them. By the second week of October, both Amandelbult and Swartklip were on strike. Titus Setlhlets, in Northam, summarised a situation in which disgruntled workers mobilised and 'requested everyone not to go to work'. Thereafter, 'we met at the central place called Richard shaft in Swartklip.'

The intention was to march to management's offices (in both North and South, these are the two mining segments in Swartklip) to hand over a memorandum of grievances. They gave management seven days to respond. 'From there', Setlhlets, remembered, 'we said we needed some people who can go and represent us, that's when seven people were elected and I was [one of those] elected to lead them'.³⁶ Setlhlets recalled that he was chosen because of his consistent historical involvement in assisting workers as a Health and Safety representative who rarely failed to follow through with tasks. Both NUM members and NUM shop stewards were present.

One informal worker leader (who was not elected as one of the seven representatives), interpreted the industrial action as an 'NUM strike because there was no AMCU at the time'.³⁷ In reality, however, it is clear that although the strike was primarily organised by

³³ This quote is drawn from an interview conducted with a leading mineworker on Amplats on 17 August 2013 in Rustenburg. He did not wish to be named so in this article I call him Tumelo, a pseudonym.

³⁴ The quotes in this paragraph are drawn from an interview conducted with a leading mineworker named S.K. Makhanya on 9 August 2013 in Siraleng, Rustenburg.

³⁵ Interview, Makhanya.

³⁶ Interview, Setlhlets.

³⁷ Interview, Kauta.

NUM members, it was independent from unions, including the NUM. Several thousand workers, or almost the entire workforce (of Swartklip) were present on that day, on 3 October 2012. They marched more than 2 kilometres from the northern segment of the mining region to the southern and the seven who were elected handed in the memorandum to the management (in this case Mr. Tendaupenyu and Mr. Philips Schoeman respectively):

... the main thing we wanted to do was to brief [them] workers about the demands we wanted to put forward and check if they agreed with the demands and I think we got an agreement to put the demands forward and [we] agreed to march peacefully to the management office[s]... and handed in the memorandum to say we won't stop striking until he [the management official] met our demands.³⁸

The seven-day period for management to respond was lapsing fast and workers were becoming increasingly dissatisfied. *The Star* reported that on 9 October 2012, Dan Sebabi, COSATU's Provincial Secretary in Limpopo at the time, had hoped to have a positive intervention.³⁹ His car was stoned, however, allegedly by striking mineworkers outside of Dichaba shaft where 2000 workers had met. The strikers indicated that COSATU had failed them, 'We have a strike today because NUM, which is affiliated to COSATU, has failed us. COSATU, just like NUM, is not welcome because we're on a strike as workers and not under any union'.⁴⁰ The mineworkers' informal spokesperson summarised the manner in which workers, much like those in the Rustenburg region, felt betrayed by their union and had few other options but to mobilise independently: 'Instead of defending us against mine management, NUM has befriended them, and they wine and dine together. How do they protect us against their friends and how do we trust them again after they have failed to get our real grievances addressed'?⁴¹

The strike continued throughout the month of October 2012 and worker committee members from each shaft at Amplats Rustenburg region and the Northam region met regularly outside parking lots next to a Shell Garage in the centre of Rustenburg. Mass meetings, often consisting of thousands of workers, were also held outside each shaft on a daily basis. They met with management whose offer to provide workers a R2000 once-off hardship allowance was refused on the basis that it did not begin to address workers' demands for a living wage of R16,070.

By the 27th of that month, COSATU organised a march through Rustenburg in an attempt to 'reclaim Rustenburg'. Amplats workers from both Northam and Rustenburg deliberated about whether or not to take part. They concluded:

We are going to that rally because we are still members of the NUM. And as members of NUM, we are bound to be part of that rally because it's being called for us. And maybe it's an opportunity to come face to face with the top office bearers of COSATU and tell them directly why we are against NUM.⁴²

Key leaders of both COSATU and the NUM including Zwelinzima Vavi, Frans Baleni, Sdumo Dlamini and Blade Nzimande appeared to be jovial when they marched through

³⁸ Interview, Setlhletsli.

³⁹ P. Tau, 'Violence breaks out at Limpopo mine', *The Star*, 10 October (2012).

⁴⁰ Interview with Amplats mineworker Thabo Dube (appears in Tau, 'Violence breaks out').

⁴¹ Interview, Setlhletsli.

⁴² This quote is drawn from an interview with Bheki Buthelezi, who was working closely with workers at Amplats in an attempt to extend their strike. The interview was conducted in Rustenburg on 17 September 2013.

Rustenburg with about 1,000 unionists in a respectful attempt to ‘Reclaim Rustenburg’ inside the Alliance.⁴³ But anti-NUM workers, who had arrived in red NUM t-shirts in order not to be identified, took them off at the start of the rally and began to burn them. One worker who was present felt the message they sent at the rally to the then General Secretary of COSATU, Zwelinzima Vavi, was ‘Don’t say you [COSATU] will reclaim Rustenburg. You don’t own Rustenburg. We own Rustenburg’.⁴⁴ The Amplats workers from the two regions concluded that they needed to hold a mass meeting of their own. About 10,000 mineworkers attended the march at Olympia Stadium on 10 November 2012.

The strikers left the rally with confidence that they would emerge victorious. In response, Vavi made an alternative plan and requested to meet with the workers’ committee so he could negotiate a deal with management on their behalf. They met on 12 November, two days after the workers’ rally and on 18 November the strike ended. The strike, by that time, was not as powerful as it had been previously: some operations were dropping out and others were getting tired. They agreed to a salary adjustment of R400. As one worker explained, ‘The workers committee came with R400 in two months and then NUM comes with R400 in 12 months’.⁴⁵ The key issue that led workers to leave NUM and form their own committees, was their wages, not a larger political consciousness. The mobilisation was independent of any trade union at the time and later laid the foundation for AMCU’s own militant trajectory. Wage negotiations were to continue in 2013, and workers hoped that they would then be able to reach an agreement that put their salaries somewhere near R16,070.

The Transition to AMCU: The Longest Strike in South African Mining History

Worker committees created the conditions in which a union, AMCU, could take hold in the platinum belt. It was also a shift that involved workers’ own decision-making and agency as they would now, in their own view, be at the forefront of the new union. AMCU’s identity was forged around a militant democratic project focused on radical increases in wages. Indeed they would adopt a living wage demand of R12,500, uniting the three platinum mines in a five-month strike, but they would fall short it linking to other unions (and other aspects of the working class) in an attempt to forge unity in a common anti-capitalist struggle. Management at Amplats, in both Rustenburg and Northam, needed a legitimate group with which to engage that was legitimate in the eyes of the workers, or – in their view – risk anarchy. The company therefore issued ‘interim access’ to what they called the ‘Interim Committee’, made up of worker committee members from shafts in both regions.

An agreement presented to the worker committee leaders stated that ‘the granting of the interim access to the Interim Committee as set out in these guidelines was a precondition to the return to work by the supporters of the Interim Committee’. Management made clear, however, that they were not granting organisational rights, but merely providing access to ‘office facilities and basic amenities.’ The agreement concluded by insisting that the committee would ‘have to be registered as a trade union in accordance with the provisions of

⁴³ G. Marinovich, ‘War: COSATU VS Amplats Strikers. Battlefield: Rustenburg’. Daily Maverick Online, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-10-27-war-cosatu-vs-amplats-strikers-battlefield-rustenburg/>. Accessed: 24 October 2017.

⁴⁴ This quote is drawn from an interview with Godfrey Lindani (nicknamed ‘Mabanana’) on 18 September 2013 in Rustenburg.

⁴⁵ This quote is drawn from a mineworker leader who did not want to be named. It was conducted on 9 June 2013 (by Botsang Mmope), in Rustenburg.

the Labour Relations Act of 1995 (“the LRA”) prior to it being eligible for recognition at the operations of Rustenburg Platinum Mines.⁴⁶

All Rustenburg Amplats units (mine shafts) were granted up to three part-time representatives and one full-time representative. This also included the Northam units, Amandelbult and Swartklip. The purpose of these representatives, from the perspective of management, was to resolve conflicts in the workplace in order to ensure productivity. The interim access was to end on 31 December 2012.⁴⁷ Setlhlets, who would become the AMCU Chairperson of Swartklip shaft explained the process through which workers joined AMCU:

... the management advised us either to form our own union or we must join another union. During the strike [of 2012] we had already asked everybody that whoever wanted to join AMCU was welcome and forms were available. It was not forced but it was a choice for individuals to join or not to join but fortunately most of the people joined there, then Anglo agreed that they must submit the forms and they will send somebody to come and verify the forms ... then they agreed and processed the stop orders.⁴⁸

By February 2013, workers had gained recognition rights under AMCU and by the middle of the year AMCU had eclipsed the NUM as representative of Amplats, Impala and Lonmin. Titus provided an in-depth explanation of what happened in late 2013 and the January 2014, in the lead up to the five-month AMCU strike:

After the [December 2013] break we came back and held mass meetings and announced that we had continued to negotiate with the company during the December to try and resolve so that we don't go on strike, but the company was adamant to say that, 'no', they will not give us what we want and we learned that they are actually used to agreeing with the NUM union for the things that the workers do not want. So in January we reported to the workers that the company is still adamant and the workers said, 'no', if the company does not want to give us what we want – let us have the central mass meetings so that we can either vote for a strike or take a different approach. We took that to the President of AMCU and he called a mass meeting in Rustenburg where we were bused to the [Olympia] Stadium... [and] he asked if we will be going to strike or must we sign the offer that was on the table. Then the workers said no we go on strike.⁴⁹

On 23 January 2014, the great strike began. The decision to join AMCU led to a situation in which, under the leadership of its president, Joseph Mathunjwa, workers at the three platinum companies undertook a collective struggle for R12,500. At a speech in a mass meeting of about 3,000 workers a few days before, Mathunjwa offered a critique of capitalism when he put forth the logic behind the impending strike:

Comrades, our future was determined even before we were born by the capitalists. By the time our mothers were expecting babies, the capitalist class was very jubilant

⁴⁶ The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from an unpublished Anglo document entitled, 'Rustenburg Platinum Mines Limited: Interim Access Guidelines for the Own Mines Managed Operations' (2012), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁷ Anglo Document, 'Interim Access Guidelines'.

⁴⁸ Interview, Setlhlets.

⁴⁹ Interview, Titus.

because another slave was on its way. We [are] the slaves. Comrade, it's up to us that we continue the way the things are continuing, or we change the course.⁵⁰

Indeed, mineworkers still desired a living wage, but beyond speeches from one or two leaders, I could find little or no evidence whatsoever of an attempt to link the attainment of a 'living wage' to broader working class struggles. They held meetings daily to report back to each other about what was happening, and also to give themselves confidence in numbers to strengthen their collective action. After all, police brutality against mineworkers had not ended on the day of the Marikana massacre.

About one month into the great strike of 2014, during a mass meeting of about 800 mineworkers at Swartklip mine outside B Hostel, on 10 February 2014, Shadow Ncedani was shot dead by a police officer with an R-5 rifle. In the midst of the strike, tensions had been mounting and rumours spread that mineworkers were preparing to destroy mining company property. Kauta recounted the horrific details of the event:

They shot him [Shadow]. What I saw while standing on the pile of rock is that those guys came in a police quantum van and we stood there knowing that they can't climb the rock mountain and that guy as the leader went straight to them to say, 'no don't shoot these guys [the mineworkers on strike], they are just singing'. Those two policemen ... shot him and he tried to run away, they shot part of his chin off and at that moment I ran away myself.⁵¹

He remembered that it was raining, which may have added to the sombre mood, but people did not have umbrellas. The mineworkers present were beginning to mourn and also questioned why the killing needed to happen: 'we ended up singing and some of the guys were crying 'coz [sic] of what had happened yet there had been no vandalism done on the mine, yet we lost our guy Shadow'.⁵²

The workers fought against hunger amongst themselves and their families and faced ongoing police repression. One worker leader expressed the deep level of motivation and sacrifice at a mass meeting outside one of the mines in Northam called Ditshaba, when he told the rank and file:

They must stop panicking about our child and wife at home whom they think will die at home of hunger. Just tell them simply that we have committed ourselves to go on strike now. So if they feel these pains that our children will die of hunger they must leave our child [to] die at home.⁵³

While the worker committees which led the strikes of 2012 had been absorbed into AMCU and in other cases marginalised, AMCU nevertheless took on a democratic character throughout the 2014 strike, representing militant workers that had only become more resolved since the Marikana massacre took place two years earlier. The union simply would not bow out of the strike without the consent of the rank and file. As one worker from Lonmin indicated, 'He [Mathunjwa] wanted to get a mandate from us ... so he just take[s]

⁵⁰ Part of a speech by Joseph Mathunjwa, at Olympia Stadium, Rustenburg, 19 January 2014. I personally recorded this speech and had it transcribed.

⁵¹ Interview, Kauta.

⁵² Interview, Kauta.

⁵³ This quote is drawn from an interview I conducted with S.K. Makhanya during the 2014 strike at his home in Siraleng (in Rustenburg) on 4 May 2014.

our mandate as it is'.⁵⁴ Five months into the strike, the workers and their union settled for major increases of R1,000 per year for the next three years (about 20 per cent increase per year).

The length and intensity of the five-month strike was impressive, perhaps even heroic, in the eyes of observers who had hoped that ordinary people's agency could play a role in transforming structures that exclude the working class from their share in society's salaries, goods and services. A look beneath the surface, however, revealed certain limitations. While the Marikana massacre; the creation of independent workers' committees (which had radical demands); the response of workers in the face of managements' threats to dismiss striking mineworkers; and the decision to unite workers at the three platinum mines under the auspices of the union, collectively demonstrated workers' agency and the ways in which they have responded in the face of changing historical circumstances, the demands of mineworkers over this period have nevertheless remained relatively narrow. The AMCU continues to be defined by 'economic unionism' – using strike action in order to obtain better wages and improved working and living conditions, without being involved in an ongoing struggle to transform the lives of the broader working class.⁵⁵ For example, the President of NUMSA, Andrew Chirwa, who had hoped to ally with AMCU workers in order to extend the reach of their strike, was prevented from speaking in January of 2014 at the AMCU strike launch rally at Olympia Stadium in Rustenburg.⁵⁶

Worker after worker who my research team and I interviewed in the platinum after the 2014 strike ended summarised the difference between the NUM and AMCU: AMCU got them money and negotiated on their behalf while NUM sat cosy with management. From 2012, one mineworker confirmed that, 'we changed the union. The union that we have now is the union that is making sure that workers get money. That other one [NUM] was looking at the government, they have shares with the government. When government says we increase by R300 [per year], the union will agree.' He further elaborated, 'when we are talking about money maybe we say "we want R500", the government would say give them R250 and you must know in the minutes when you sign for money you sign for three years'.⁵⁷ The NUM was incapable, linked to the ruling party (or government) workers asserted, of obtaining major increases in salaries. The militant struggle over a much better wage, for mineworkers only, remains the key feature of the contemporary movement which is the subject of this article.

Conclusion - Future Possibilities

This movement, which extended from Rustenburg to Northam, not only transformed wages and restored dignity to mineworkers, but also created a broader process of structural change in the South African political landscape; arguably it was a 'turning point'.⁵⁸ The emergence of the EFF in 2013, which adopted the workers' demand of R12,500 in their manifesto, has already brought an important challenge to the ruling ANC. More significantly perhaps, the largest trade union in the country, NUMSA, broke with the COSATU federation in part as a result of the Marikana massacre and is now a core part of a new left alliance, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), launched in April 2017. This new worker

⁵⁴ This quote is drawn from an interview I conducted in Marikana with a leading mineworker named Alfonse Mofokeng on 19 September 2014.

⁵⁵ Pillay, *Between Social Movement and Political Unionism*.

⁵⁶ This information is drawn from personal communication with S.K. Makhanya, Rustenburg, 19 January 2014.

⁵⁷ These quotes are drawn from an interview Sphiwe Mbatha conducted with an anonymous mineworker on 18 June 2017.

⁵⁸ P. Alexander, 'Marikana, Turning Point in South African History', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40, 138, pp. 605-619.

organisation combines over 700,000 members in over 20 different unions including the massive 350,000 strong NUMSA, but it has yet to prove that it is democratically driven by its membership. It has also failed to demonstrate that it will play a serious role in organising precarious workers who operate outside of traditional union structures.

Since mineworkers political identities are largely confined to a form of trade union consciousness, AMCU is unlikely to play an influential role within SAFTU. The same may be said for the United Front which has, since NUMSA's announcement of its formation in late 2013, at best stalled and at worst become moribund. On the one hand, mineworkers have helped provide the basis for new political formations (on the left of the ANC) within which to mobilise. However, they have remained trapped within the prevailing capitalist system to the extent that they were negotiating over the amount of money they should receive in wages. Workers' radical demands in the platinum belt have remained confined narrowly to particular workforces or companies.

During the several-year period in which I interviewed and observed mineworkers in the platinum belt, opposition to the ANC, COSATU and the NUM in particular was at a peak. This was highlighted by the facts that it was dangerous at times to wear red NUM T-shirts outside of the shafts where mineworkers pull platinum from the ground and that political party representatives other than the ANC leaders were unwelcome at the one-year Marikana commemoration which took place below the infamous mountain on 16 August 2013.⁵⁹ On the other side of the spectrum, the EFF's Commander-in-Chief, Julius Malema, and AMCU's President, Joseph Mathunjwa, have been brilliant at tapping into the political space opened up by the state repression (which mineworkers link to the ANC) and the perceived limitations of the NUM.

And yet there are few, if any, signs that EFF is playing a major role in the popular mobilisation of mineworkers, other than through the building of electoral support. Moreover, according to my ongoing research on the nature of AMCU in the platinum belt since the 2014 strike, the union has not developed a programme for building democratic worker structures at the shaft level that are driven by and accountable to the rank and file. Once considered by the Amplats informal worker committees to be a democratic union, AMCU is in fact proving to be deeply authoritarian. Nor is there any substantial evidence that AMCU, like the vast majority of unions in the country, made any substantial attempt to extend beyond their relatively narrow boundaries by bringing together workers, communities and students under the United Front. SAFTU has also not obtained enthusiastic support from AMCU, thus suggesting that the new federation still remains somewhat fragmented in its attempts to incorporate all the largest and most militant trade unions in the country.

The union's top down nature may also, in the relatively near future, lead to AMCU's own demise, again creating structural conditions for yet another form of collective insurgency, or perhaps even a return to a reformed NUM, which maintains firm institutional roots in the platinum belt despite its relative lack of members. An alternative possibility is that NUMSA becomes more successful in its recruitment drive in the platinum belt. Finally, there is evidence which suggests that on the periphery, in Northam, a new union is being formed. It rejects both the NUM and AMCU's top-down approach and is based on the centrality of direct democracy. However, it has not held a major public launch and remains marginal, even though there is a possibility that disgruntled workers from Rustenburg will join this new organisation in an attempt to renew their struggles over wages and improved working conditions in the region.

⁵⁹ This perception is drawn from notes I took at a meeting with the Marikana Support Campaign that included, among others, Joseph Mathunjwa and several mineworkers from Marikana. The meeting took place at St. Albans Cathedral in Pretoria on 10 August 2013.

It should be noted that radical demands and tactics are not necessarily equivalent to radical or left politics. Moreover, critiques and disdain for political and worker formations come much more quickly, and arguably with greater ease, than left alternatives. It is my contention that the vast majority of mineworkers who led the strikes of 2012 and 2014 on the Western limb of the platinum belt do not presently envision themselves as playing a leading role in forming, or contributing in meaningful ways to, this alternative outside of electoral support for the EFF and membership in the still independent AMCU.

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